

## THE FACES OF GENDER INJUSTICE WITH THE SPECIAL REFERENCE TO GITHA HARIHARAN'S *THE THOUSAND FACES OF NIGHT*

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### ABSTRACT

Githa Hariharan through her novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night* reveals in color, taste and smell, the elemental things of life; about love and death, about men and women, story and myth, passion and loneliness and clashes of cultures and continents. Many feminists, including Githa Hariharan implicitly follows Gandhi in their fight against female injustice. Men think that marriage is an instrument through which they can reduce their burden. When Baba turned twenty-one, his mother called him aside and said, "...A man needs a wife to help him with the business of living... (Page 61)."

**KEYWORDS:** Githa Hariharan, The Thousand Faces of Night

### INTRODUCTION

They view women as machines; a machine to do errands to their family; a machine which bears child. According to Gandhi, woman was neither man's plaything nor his competitor, struggling like him. He felt what she needed most was education, the recognition of her birthright to be free and equal to steer her own destiny side by side with man. He argues,

...woman will have to determine with authority what she needs. My opinion is that, just as fundamentally men and women are one, their problem must be one in essence. The soul in both is the same. The two live in the same life, have the same feelings. Each is a complement of the other. The one cannot live without the other's active help. But somehow or other man has dominated woman from ages past, and so woman has developed an inferiority complex. She has believed in the truth of man's concept that she is inferior to him. But the seers among men have recognized her equal status (*The Ceaseless Crusader*).

Woman feels that marriage will ensure her some protection, love, compassion, happiness, empathy, mutual understanding and a protective atmosphere given by her husband. But what happens is unexpected. She feels disappointed, dejected and loneliness. "I can't help admiring his restraint, his detachment which views marriage as a necessity, a milestone like other. It is a gamble, he says (Page 49)."

"The image of woman's approach is Meehan's analysis of women on US television. Her study combined with a quantitative analysis, which counted the number and kind of representations of women, with a qualitative interpretation of

women's roles and power (lessness) within those representations. She suggested that representations on television cast 'good' woman as submissive, sensitive, and domesticated while 'bad' woman is rebellious, independent and selfish.

According to Githa, 'womanhood' especially 'Indian womanhood' is represented as a perfect mix of tradition and modernity.' The grandmother in the story tells how a traditional woman should be. She says that one day her husband sat in the prayer room where he could not find the things he needed. The flowers had not been picked, the floor unclean. He called his daughter-in-law, Devi's mother. She didn't respond. He entered into her room and yelled, "Put that veena away. Are you a wife, a daughter-in-law? (Page 30)." Then she reached for the strings of her precious veena and pulled them out of the wooden base. They became apart with a discordant twang of protest. Then she never touched the veena. She became a dutiful daughter-in-law, the neighbors praised.

It is the quality of stories within a story that makes the readers to read the novel further. In *The Thousand Faces of Night* the story of Gandhari proves it. When Gandhari comes to her mother-in law's house, not at all a house but a palace, her heart starts beating vigorously. She is nicely dressed. She is taken into bridegroom-the prince's chamber, through the marble palace. Here arises a question;

"Why did he come out to welcome her?" The answer is, "It's only in the silly stories you read in books that princes look for princesses. Actually it is the other way round (page 28)."

Many years later, when she had learnt the hard lesson that the splendid palace lacked only one luxury- privacy- she would grasp the significance of the twitching lips, the curiosity-filled eyes of her witness (page 28)." The story shows that culturally women are not given similar treatment. The female body can be made docile, submissive, erotic, usable and productive. *The Thousand Faces of Night* represents a variety of female characters, mythological (ideal) and real with varied wishes and frustrations, desires and agony searching for self-identity or self liberation. Githa's female characters revolt against considering marriage and motherhood as ultimate goals of an ideal woman. Economically women might not be equal to men, socially they are deprived of power and culturally they are not given similar treatment. This is what happens in the novel. Devi, the protagonist of the novel, a young educated girl with "the American experiences" struggles to cope with her husband Mahesh, who is often away for his business. At this time she feels loneliness and feels alienated in her own house. Like other woman, she searches for an identity and tries to free herself from the bondage of marriage which is an usual thing for these kind of women and try to free herself from the work assigned to her. The stories from her grandmother that have been narrated during her childhood inspired her and so she tries to replicate them with her own life. The stories which she heard during every summer from the mouth of her grandma are a type of inspiration for her future. Devi rightly puts it in these words:

My grandmother's stories were no ordinary bedtime stories. She chose each for a particular occasion, a story in reply to each of my childhood questions. She had an answer for every question.... A comparison had to be made, an illustration discovered, and a moral drawn out.... Her stories fashioned moulds. Ideal moulds, impossibly ambitious, that challenged the puny listener to stretch her frame and fit into the vast spaces, live up to her illustrious ancestors (Page 27).

Devi undergoes an identity crisis even after following the norms set by the society. She constantly faces the dilemma of tradition versus modernity, dilemma of cultures western versus eastern, dilemma of mind (knowledge) versus heart (true knowledge) and dilemma of being a 'good girl' versus 'bad girl', The crisis 'to be

or not to be a good girl' haunts her and the agony of identity crisis attains the desired intensity through the use of myths. The "good" girl in her wins. She leaves her past life in U.S and comes to India to marry. A victim of her own imagination of herself as a "Devi", she is trapped easily into a traditional marriage, forgetting her past.

The denouement of the novel and especially in Devi arises when she gets married with Mahesh. He takes her for granted. She is not able to adjust with the situation in his husband's house. She feels sad, dissatisfied and loneliness. Then she says,

...this then is marriage, the end of ends, two or three brief encounters a month when bodies stutter together in lazy, inarticulate lust. Two weeks a month the shadowy stranger who casually strips me of my name, snaps his fingers and demands a smiling handmaiden. And the rest? It is waiting..... My education has left me unprepared for the vast, yawning middle chapters of my womanhood (page 54).

Suddenly she asks her husband, "Why did you marry me?" He answers, "Whatever people get married for (Page 54)." The only companion in her husband house is her father-in-law. It is he who brings out again her "good" girl. He shows her the path of becoming a virtuous wife. But the contradiction in her character arises again when she hears the stories of her house-keeper, Mayamma. She feels frustrated with the repression of women surrounding her. The "bad" girl in her arises again.

Woman has been considered a machine which carries babies. Woman is only to bear the baby but not the world. Woman can bear the pregnancy pain but not the pain of her family.

"Another tour, so soon?" I asked.

"I am afraid so, what a bore" Mahesh said. "I've got papers piling up on my desk."

"Why don't you postpone the trip?" I said.

"Why don't I pray to be born a woman in my next birth," he teased. "Then I won't have to make a living at all (Page 54)."

Githa tries to break this idea. Through this, she upholds feminism. Devi's decision not to have children is a feminist. When she asks Mahesh why he wants children, he answers because everyone has them. Devi does not want to produce children because everyone is doing so. Here she tries to overcome the pressure of the society or expectations of feminist by her independent decision. Here Githa's perspective matches with Shulmith Firestone who believed the women's capacity for reproduction was the source of her oppression. This distinction allowed her to examine reproduction as the driving force in history. Women should seize control over the means of reproduction in order to eliminate sex class discrimination. This can be achieved through wider access to contraception, sterilization and abortion.

Her decision of not having children, by not trying continuously to conceive, symbolizes her search for self. Inspired by her mother-in-law who left her husband's family to lead a new life, Devi also leaves her husband's house. She begins to find her identity. Now only she realizes that in her past years, she tried to project herself as a "good" or "ideal" woman who herself acted as so. She did so only because to fulfill others' expectation and to satisfy others by suppressing her own self. She decides to fulfill her own expectations not for others. She decides to live for her but not for others. She is under her own control but not others. She questions herself;

Am I neurotic because I am a lazy woman who does not polish her floors every day? An aimless fool because I swallowed my hard-earned education, bitter and indigestible, when he tied the *thali* round my neck? A teasing bitch because I refuse him my body when his hands reaches out; and dream instead, in the spare room, of bodies tearing away their shadows and melting, like liquid wax burnt by moonlight? (Page 74)

At first she does not go to her mother's home because she is told, "A woman without a husband has no home" (Page 38). Devi finds an alternative with Gopal. She escapes from "unconcerned" husband and goes to "concerned" husband Gopal. She becomes a muse for Gopal and stays with him for some time but till she feels trapped. She again leaves Gopal finally to return to her mother or her roots to rediscover her own identity.

But to conclude, escaping from her husband and his family is not the only way to show women's empowerment. There are other means to show her feminism. A woman should think of her children and their future. The thing which makes the westerns to admire us is our family system. They wonder how a husband and a wife live for quite long decades. So woman should not try to break the tradition by moving out. Alternative has to be found. But "what is the alternative?"

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